

Mabel's Story

By Frederick A. Lepine

Frederick Lepine wrote *Mabel's Story* and entered it in the NWT Literacy Council's Writing Contest. His story won and it was included in *Northern Writes, Entries from the 1996 NWT Writing Contest*. Frederick was born in Hay River and went to Diamond Jenness Secondary School. He's been a political cartoonist, commercial fisher, forest firefighter, painter, sculptor, writer, digital artist/programmer, photographer and videographer. In 2006 and again in 2007, he completed Artist Residencies at the Banff Centre for the Arts in writing.

Fred has donated his honorarium for letting us reprint this story to the NWT Literacy Council as a prize for an adult learner's short story.

Here is *Mabel's Story*.

Not all true histories have been written, not all written histories have been true.

Her foot had slipped out like a shot from under her short, plump body and she ended up sitting there like a ragdoll on the sidewalk. White and green plastic Northern bags flailing, cans of Klik, the ones with the neat little lead skeleton keys welded on the top, and Libby's brown beans with the tiny useless portions of pork, rattle across the icy concrete and into the snow. Now, as I run to help, her National Enquirer flies up in my face and I catch a glimpse of "Navajo Medicine Man Meets E.T. in Desert".

"Nisit...", she cries when she realizes what has happened. She is consoling her ankle through worn woollen mittens. I have to get her off the concrete or she'll freeze there. Colin, the store manager, a tall balding white man in his fifties, rushes out through the litter of Pilot biscuits, Kraft Dinner boxes and cans of Coke. His foot catches a bottle of HP sauce and punts it off the sidewalk and into the parking lot.

I am trying to pick her up by the shoulders of her thin spring parka, but she's not helping. She just rocks back and forth and holds her ankle crying, "Nisit, nisit..."

"Are you okay Mabel?" Colin asks in his thick Scottish accent. He's down on one knee now, and begins rubbing her foot as well. I'm still trying to get her off the concrete, because for some reason, I think she's going to freeze there. The raspy voice of my mother floods in from somewhere in the sharp November wind like a scratchy LP, "*Whiss, you sit on the ice like that, you'll get piles...!*"

"Do ye want me to call an ambulance?" asks Colin. Then, before she can reply, he turns his head and yells, "Aaron, get me a blanket! Un' be quick!" At first I don't see young Einstein, the clerk who had come out of the store behind Colin. He is there more out of curiosity than concern. At Colin's bark, the pock-faced kid scatters like he just discovered he has wiped the hard drive clean on his old man's computer. I'm still trying to get old Mabel to her feet, and I finally manage to pull one cheek off the concrete, Colin says to me, "Let her rest a wee bit. She'll be okay in a minute." *Okay with me*, I think. I place her gently back down on the sidewalk, and begin to chase puffed bags of Cheezies and Lipton Noodle soup boxes across the parking lot, because that's the only thing I can think of doing right now.

By the time I have collected the last pages of the National Enquirer from under an old Volvo across the street, Colin seems to have things well in hand. I trudge back to the store entrance with most of the paper under my arm, the rest I try to read in the light of the parking lot. "Bigfoot Spotted in Las Vegas Motel".

Colin already has her and her bags stuffed into the back seat of Phil's taxi. He has placed a brand new grey woollen blanket around her and I hear him saying, "Don't ye worry now, Mabel. I'll have Rita Williams the home nurse drop in on ye tomorrow mornin'. Aaron'll bring the rest of yer groceries around tonight on 'is way home. I'll get someone t'make sure ye get home in one piece. You just stay off that ankle until Rita gets there, y'hear?"

Something like "Ehhhh...", comes from the back seat. *Man. Old people!* I think.

"Make sure she gets home okay, will ye Tommy?" Colin turns to me holding the cab door open.

"Now wait a goddamn min..." I blurt. Colin glares at me. "Don' fret, he'll carry yer groceries up fer ye as well, Mabel. He's a good lad.

"Oh and Phil, make sure you get Tommy back to where he's going to and charge it to the store." He smiles as I slide numbly into the back of the cab.

A ride in Phil's taxi with an old woman -probably the first free thing Colin has given away since he came North. Probably just trying to avoid a lawsuit. Damn, I was just going for a beer with Kicker and Big Man. Looks like they'll have to start without me. Great- they're slappin back cold ones, and I get to take care of Granny, I think.

Within minutes we are clipping down the highway out to the reserve with this old lady, two bags of snow-covered groceries and a National Enquirer. Phil is thumping his fingers to Alabama's "Mountain Music" on the radio. We have to take the long way to the reserve because the ice bridge across the Hay River hasn't frozen over yet. *It'll be last call by the time I get back,* I think.

"Tansi," she says quietly after a while. I just smile and nod. I begin to pretend reading the National Enquirer with the help of passing streetlights. I can feel her staring at me from behind the thin blue paisley scarf.

"What's your name, Tommy" she asks a little while later.

"Tommy," I say. Geez. *Some old people's kids.*

"Waal! I mean your last name." A chuckle wheezes out from deep in her chest.

"Squirrel." I give up the information as though she might stalk me some day.

"Squirrel...Your parents from around Norman, eh?"

"Don't know, never been there. I'm from here." I keep my gaze planted on the Enquirer. *Lose 40 Pounds in 40 Days!*

"Used to know some Squirrels from up around Norman one time. Good hunters, them. What's your Mooshum's name?"

"My grandfather? Squirrel." I'm not going to make it any easier for her.

"Waal!" I mean ees first name." That throaty wheeze again.

"James, I think. I don't know. I think they just used to call him Old Man. Don't know anything about him. Never met the guy. I think he's dead." My eyes are still glued to the paper. "Make \$10,000 - This Month Alone!"

"I think I know who see is" she says.

"Who is?" I ask, puzzled.

"Your Mooshum."

"Oh him - my grandfather. You mean who he is," I correct her and go back to the Enquirer.

"Eh-hehn. Him - I think I know who see is. One time - looong time ago - one winter, it was hard to find food. Lots of snow, eh? That time my family just starving. My husband Alphonse, see's real sick with the flu. We live in Wrigley that time. Your Mooshum, see come down from Norman, that time with ees kids. Maybe your Dad too. They kill a caribou on the trail, there. Wah-whay, they feed us good until Alphonse gets well again. Good hunters, those Squirrels," she trails off in the dark. Then after a long silence, she says, quietly, "I never forget that..."

"Hmph," I say without looking up. "Loni's Big Night Out - and She's Not Alone!"

Nothing is said for several minutes and soon the streetlights have all passed. We are bathed only in the light of Phil's dashboard with the hum of the car and Buck Owens singing "Love's Gonna Live Here Again" in the background. Phil is banging away on the steering wheel, but now he's singing the guitar parts too. I push the newspaper into one of Mabel's Northern bags and play with my leather gloves.

"How come you don't know your Mooshum's name?" she suddenly asks out of the dark. She sounds bothered.

"Huh..?" I look up. "What do you mean?"

"How come you don't know your own Mooshum's name? How come you don't know nothing about him?"

"Not important, I guess. No need," I shrug.

"Eschia! What you mean not important?" I can feel her glaring at me in the dark. Kind of like being watched when you go outside to get an armful of wood at night.

"I got better things to do than live in the past." I'm about to add that stuff like that is for old people, but I catch myself. That sets off my mother's voice again - this time she's coming through the whine in the back tire. "*Be nice to old people - some day you, you're gonna be...*"

"Whiss, you kids these days don't know nothing 'bout where you come from. How you gonna know where you go from here?" Mabel sighs and looks out at the night. I go back to playing with my leather gloves again. *Old people. God if I ever make it past twenty-five...*

Then she leans back in the seat, closes her eyes and begins to hum quietly to herself. It is not long before I find myself humming along with her in my head. My mother used to sing that song, but it has been so long, I have forgotten the words.

"I live across now" she says softly pointing in the direction of the reserve with her lips. "But I'm not from here, eh? My name is Mabel Vera Cardinal. I'm a Cree from Fond-du-Lac, Saskatchewan. I grew up on a

trapline near Waterways in Alberta. When I was a smaall little girl, maybe nikotwasik, six, my mother see take me to the...kiskinwahamatowikamik... the mission school in Chipewyan, eh? See says you stay here now - you learn English. I come back and get you when it's finished. They say you learn to read and write in Cree and English too, when it's finished. Wah-whay, I wait by the gate every day, every night. I wait by the river. But my mother, see never comes back. See never come back." Then she quietly adds, "Me, I think, taniwa? Where see is?"

"And those priests and nuns in the mission -some of them were not very good people. They say God, see save your soul. I say from what? They say, from the Devil. Me, I never heard about the Devil till that time, eh? They tell me bad things about being Indian. Crees, especially. The Devil see lives in Crees, they say. They don't let me speak Cree no more. Only English and Francais. But we fool them, eh? We sneak at recess time. Talk Cree all the time." She wheezes a dry laugh once again. "Finally, my aunt, see come one day. See take me away after two years. See take me back to the trapline with my uncle. Ay-hay, I speak my Cree again."

"One boy I meet at mission school, Alphonse. I marry him in 1946 in Fort Smith. Yeah, 1946, Ay-hay, we move all over the place. See work for the Hudson Bay Company, that time. Him, see buy a camera to take pictures, eh? See sure like ees camera, Alphonse. Him, see speak Slavey. All the time me, I speak Cree. I learn some Slavey, some Chip and maybe some Dogrib. Sometimes English, but all the time Cree. Me too, I force Alphonse to learn Cree. Ay-hay, see say why? Nobody here speak Cree. I say, that's why. Nobody here to talk to. So, see learn Cree. Alphonse, see was a good man, eh?"

"Me, I never forget. I teach my kids Cree when they're small. I say someday you meet your grandmother, you talk Cree to her. But they forget. Soon as they go to school, they forget. After a while they forget everything I teach them. Now, I don't know where they are. They forget." Her voice trails off again. "My mother. Maybe see forget, too."

With a clunk we are off the highway and onto the reserve road. The smooth pavement has given way to frozen gravel and Phil's taxi is riding like a big lake fishboat rolling on the water. For some reason I find myself becoming not just interested, but quietly fascinated in how her story comes out.

"What happened to Alphonse?" I find myself asking.

"Alphonse, see die from pneumonia in 1973. Twelve years after we meet your Mooshum. Your Mooshum, he was a good man too. A good hunter, that one. Ohhh, see really know how to play the fiddle. Alphonse, see play the guitar. All night long." That wheezing laugh again. "I remember one time. Alphonse and him, they make a bet who can stay up the longest playing all night, eh? Your Mooshum, him see bets ees fiddle. And Alphonse him he bet ees camera. WahWhay! They still awake the next morning when I go for water! Both of them still playing!" Her rasping laugh soon turns into a hacking cough. I am caught up in her story and find myself laughing with her.

For the next several minutes she tells me about the time Alphonse and Old Man Squirrel were playing a jig when the fiddle suddenly broke off at the neck. She supposed that Old Man Squirrel might have been playing a little too hard. She breaks up with another low cackle, this time the coughing has her wheezing for air. Then, suddenly she is telling me about going to night school. She has decided to learn to read and write at the age of sixty-six. "Ay-hay, maybe I have some great grandchildren someday. I write to them. Teach them Cree," she says.

Once again everything returns to the soft hum of the car and this time Pasty Cline is crooning "Sweet Dreams of You". Phil is whistling the piano parts.

"Me, I have a history, eh?" she suddenly blurts out in the dark.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"That's what they tell me at night school. I have a language and I have a history. Even when I was married, the Catholic Church, they take my name. They even take me away from my family. They try to teach me that where I come from is wrong. They say, you're just a woman. You, your family's not important. But me, I keep the truth alive, eh? Because me, I know where I come from, eh? I am Mabel Vera Cardinal and I come from Fond-du-Lac, Saskatchewan. I am a Cree." Proud anger. Defiance. From behind the thin blue paisley scarf. From the dark back seat of Phil's taxi.

As we approach the streetlights on the reserve, she softly repeats, "I have a language, and I have a history," then adds, "but me, I have no one to pass it on to. Everybody here speak Slavey."

Arm in arm, we slowly climb the steps of her tiny house. She seems much smaller, lighter and frailer than she appeared in the parking lot at the Northern Store. I help Phil carry her groceries in. He is still singing, this time Chuck Barry's "My Dingaling". The house is warm and welcoming. The dry kitchen air tells me she has cooked bannock here today. Maybe even earlier tonight. I help her get seated and take off her boots. She asks me to get her cane from behind the couch in the living room.

As I enter the tiny, dimly lit room, I am overcome with that same feeling of being watched. But this time it is different. This time it is comforting. I slide my hand along the wall and flick the light on. To my surprise I find myself surrounded by people. Hundreds and hundreds of photographs fill every bit of available space on the walls, the furniture, even the floor! People are everywhere. Old people, young people, families, couples. People smiling, singing, working, playing. Women, men, children, dogs, horses, farms, tents, trading posts. People on boats in the river, in the bush, fishing, hunting, trapping. Each photograph has been painstakingly framed in hand-carved wood or beadwork, and there in almost every picture is the same, small, thin face of a woman at different times in her life - Mabel.

"You got time for tea and bannock, Tommy? I got some hot raisin bannock," she calls from the kitchen. I can hear her removing her coat and scarf.

"Uh, not really, I'm supposed to meet somebody," I answer from the living room. I find her cane and bring it to her. She has already put the kettle on when I get there.

"You sure you gonna be okay with your foot and everything? I could drop in later this week and..." I am shocked at what I am saying. Hey, *I'm the guy who doesn't like old people.*

"You wait here. I get something for you." She hobbles with her cane into the bedroom. A few moments later she comes out with a cardboard box under her arm. It is about the size of a case of beer, wrapped in a brown faded copy of "The World News" and tied with cotton string, worn, knotted, and in a bow.

"Here. You get home, you open this. Fresh bannock," she says.

Phil has fallen asleep on the horn now, so I say goodbye as quickly as I can. I want to protest her giving me the bannock, but she gently touches my forearm and says, "Mahsi, nikosis."

Once again, we are back on the paved highway leading into town. I have the grey woollen blanket wrapped around my legs now, surprised at the fact that I am not worried about catching something from old people's blankets. As I reach behind to adjust the blanket, my hand brushes against the National Enquirer. Has she left it for me? I wonder. I open it once more. "Stradivarius Found in Mayan Ruins"

What follows can only be described as a thin slice of deafening silence. Then in a frenzy, I begin to tear at the box. The old newspaper disintegrates like brittle tissue, it's all over the back seat and on the floor of the cab. Only after several tries am I able to break the thick cotton string. Then, slowly, ever so slowly, I lift the top off the box.

It is truly beautiful. Inlaid with pearl and finished in a deep golden brown varnish, I wonder how it has kept its finish after all those years on the trapline. As I look closely, I can see where the neck had been cracked once and was carefully repaired again. The strings are still taut. There is still a splash of resin left on the body. Whether the fiddle is in or out of tune, I cannot say.

But that doesn't matter. What does matter is on the back of the scroll near the tip: the tiny handcarved letters *J. Squirrel 1958*.

"Hey Phil? You wanna turn around? I think I forgot something back there." I yell over Hank William's "Honky Tonk Man".

"What? All the way back? Why - what did you forget?" he asks in the rear-view mirror.

"The rest of my history lesson." I smile. Heck, a free cab ride from someone like Colin comes around once every 30 years or so. Might as well make good use of it.